

Oh, For a Touch of the Vanished Hand': Discovering a Southern Family and the Civil War

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Review

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Common Soldiers, Uncommon Historian

More than a few of my fellow graduate students in the seminar on the Civil War and Reconstruction at the University of Kentucky in the fall of 1977 were there because they had been influenced by Bell Wiley's writings. Wiley, the man *Life* magazine once called "the nation's foremost authority of soldier life during the Civil War," had recently retired from Emory University and was in Lexington as a visiting professor, and the excitement in the seminar room on the first day of the semester was nothing short of remarkable. Almost an icon in the study of the Civil War, Wiley was the author of such seminal works as *The Life of Johnny Reb* (Louisiana State University Press, ISBN 0807119091, \$29.95 hardcover), *The Road to Appomattox* (Louisiana State University Press, ISBN 0807119113, \$14.95 softcover), and *Southern Negroes, 1861-1865* (Yale University Press, 1938). I remember vividly as he first walked into the room and the student sitting next to me whispered, "Some people *really* are larger than life, aren't they?"

Perhaps so—for **The Bell Irvin Wiley Reader** is a volume that establishes, without doubt, that Wiley was, in so many ways, the uncommon "common man" of which he wrote so often. Most Festschrifts are exercises in vanity either for the honoree or the contributors, but not this volume. Indeed, this is a book by and about Bell Wiley, and it provides compelling insights into the man and the scholar. Culled from a collection of 176 boxes of Bell Wiley's personal papers at Emory, the selections present an impressive cross-section of his work, both written and oral, and illuminate many of Wiley's favorite subjects. The speeches and articles include such classics as "The Road to War," "Lincoln, Plain Man of the People," "Life on the Confederate Homefront," "The Collapse of the Confederacy," "American History and Racial Understanding," "Historians and

the National Register," and "Why Teach the Civil War." Also included are some of Wiley's lecture notes, one of his demanding exams (to which I can personally attest!), and an oral history interview with the historian.

Yet, to understand Wiley, the historian and the scholar, one must understand Wiley, the man, and it is perhaps to this endeavor that the **Wiley Reader** makes its greatest contribution. Seemingly, Bell Wiley was destined to be a Civil War historian. "I grew up with the Civil War," Wiley wrote. "My native region in western Tennessee was the scene of considerable fighting, and I heard much talk of General Forrest who campaigned in that part of the country, and of Shiloh, which was not far from my home..." As a child, Wiley picked cotton and, as the editors write, "From the beginning, this tall, lanky farm boy was immersed in agrarian tradition, with a strict Methodist upbringing and the strong influence of parents who were schoolteachers. Bell's ten brothers and sisters also played a large part in his formative years."

Wiley received his undergraduate degree from Asbury College in 1928 and his M.A. in English the next year at the University of Kentucky. Five years later, under the direction of the distinguished historian and fellow Southerner U.B. Phillips, Wiley received his doctorate from Yale University. Thus began a scholarly career that spanned almost half a century. His dissertation, *Southern Negroes*, became his first published book and established Wiley as a pioneer in studying the common people of the Civil War era.

This area of expertise was particularly appropriate for such a humble "common man" as Wiley. A consummate professional, Wiley's craft was teaching and his warm, folksy delivery, his gift for storytelling, and his love of the subject matter permeated his classroom and excited his students. Listening to Wiley talk some 24 years ago, I witnessed a master historian plying his trade with such grace and enthusiasm that it was very difficult not to become enthralled. Throughout the introduction to the **Wiley Reader** are testimonials from his former students, prominent and unsung alike, about how influential, unassuming, and humane he was, and how, most importantly, he cared about them. As one who knew him in and out of the classroom during the last three years of his life, I can confirm that such reminiscences are no mere hyperbole.

His contributions were immense. Turning attention away from battlefields and generals, Wiley pioneered the field of social history and elevated it to a respectable and appropriate level. No historians who attempts to write about the

Civil War in its grandest scope can forget the lesson that Wiley taught about the people who fought (or were fought about) or who remained on the home front. His meticulous and painstaking research was awe-inspiring; for *The Life of Billy Yank* alone, Wiley traveled 23,000 miles across 23 states in a single year! By his own account, Wiley examined more than 30,000 wartime letters, diaries, and manuscripts—resulting in the publication of two dozen books, numerous journal and magazine articles, and 300 book reviews.

Wiley the scholar could also become Wiley the crusader. An ardent opponent of segregation, Wiley used his writings at times to make social commentary. For example, "The South Goes Confederate" concludes with Wiley's "confession of changing his mind about the importance of slavery in the coming of the conflict." A century after the war, and at the dawn of the 1960s civil rights movement, Wiley, the grandson of a Confederate private, realized that his opinions were certain to cost him friends and perhaps injure his standing in the historical profession. "once you meet [black Americans]," he wrote, "you can't accept segregation." Thus, as a champion of the common man during a war long over, Wiley took up the mantle of integration at Emory. "The educational and cultural uplift of black students," he would write, "is a responsibility which lies with the public, tax-supported institutions." The impact that Wiley had on his students concerning questions of race and race relations is immeasurable.

And yet, despite being so accomplished and revered, there was a certain sadness, or so I thought at the time, to Bell Wiley that occasionally surfaced in the conversations I had with him. To read this volume is to see Bell Wiley in all of his dimensions, including such human frailties as the depression, sometimes debilitating, from which he suffered throughout his career. The editors of this volume, as well as Wiley's son John, who consented to be interviewed, are to be commended for their honesty, candor, and affection in compiling the biographical material included herein. "Father always felt that if you were going to tell a story you had to tell 'warts and all,'" his son stated. And the editors agreed: Wiley "did not sugar coat his profiles of common soldiers; he coupled accounts of valor and courage with accounts of prostitution, profanity and drinking. Bell Wiley dealt in reality, and the mention of dark moments in his life does not diminish his character or accomplishments; he remains one of the greatest Civil War historians."

That he does. During one conversation with him at the end of the semester I remarked that he seemed to be somewhat down. He managed a smile and agreed

but said nothing else, and I walked away not understanding. Now I do.

This superb anthology makes it quite clear that Wiley was, as the editors conclude, an enigma. A distinguished scholar, he enjoyed the company of ordinary people; a spiritual man, he sought out the “earthy companionship” of people like William Faulkner; a staunch advocate of civil rights, he would not accept the easing of admission standards for minority students; an esteemed professor whose rich and full life was what most people could only dream about, he was plagued by depression; humble and unpretentious, he actively sought professional recognition from his academic peers. Perhaps, then, my fellow graduate student was right so many years ago: Bell Wiley was indeed larger than life.

Jason H. Silverman is a professor of history at Winthrop University. A former South Carolina Governor’s Professor of the year, he is author of a forthcoming biography of Confederate General Nathan “Shanks” Evans and is completing a history of the Civil War and Reconstruction for Prentice Hall.